Essential Notebook Apps

For Those Times You're Away From Home

When you get a new laptop, you're sure to load it with the same software you use on your desktop PC: an office suite, your favorite Web browser, work-related applications, and perhaps a game or two. But a notebook isn't a desktop. The mobility aspect brings with it both positive features and issues to contend with, including battery power, wireless Internet access, and new security worries. That's why applications that you never needed or considered for your desktop PC will make your portable computer shine. I rounded up 10 essential programs that can help make your portable computing experience more productive and easier, plus add some fun.

by Kevin Savetz

Bartels Media MaxiVista 2

When you're at home at work on your desktop PC, don't let the laptop sit idle in its cushy case. MaxiVista is a clever program that turns your laptop's screen into a second monitor for your PC. You just network the two machines via TCP/IP (Ethernet, a wireless LAN, or FireWire will do), install software on both PCs, and voila, the desktop thinks it has two screens. (And if it already has two, it will have three.)

We reviewed MaxiVista 1 for the September 2004 issue (page 75). This version features a lower price, improves video playback on the secondary screen, and supports additional monitor configurations. The new Professional and Mirror Pro versions ($40 and $50, respectively) let you get fancy by creating a giant Desktop space with up to four computers or let you control four PCs with one keyboard and mouse through what is essentially a software KVM switch. You can try the MaxiVista 2 free for 15 days.

Cyberlink PowerDVD 6

No notebook is complete without an app for watching movies. Yes, you use Windows Media Player to watch DVDs, but PowerDVD 6 plays many formats that Media Player chokes on. With headphones plugged into your laptop, PowerDVD also provides superior audio, thanks to a wider sound image and virtual surround sound.

When you download your movies and TV shows to your notebook to watch with PowerDVD, you never know which of a multitude of codecs they might be encoded in. It's a good bet you'll need DivX (see our review of the latest version on page 78) and XviD for videos. For those times when you find yourself with a media file that seems to use some other codec, download GSpot Codec Information Appliance (free; gspot.headbands.com), which figures out which audio/video codecs an AVI file requires to play and tells you the codes that are already installed on your system.

Fanix Software As-U-Type 3.1

Tapping away on those little laptop keys can lead to lots of typos. As-U-Type checks your spelling as you type, learns the spelling mistakes you make, and (if you choose) can automatically correct them. In the simplest mode, the app highlights incorrectly spelled words. The program really shines in automatic correction mode, where it remembers that you spelled "sincerely" wrong before and corrects the word when you do it again. As-U-Type works in most applications, providing easy access to a spell checker in your presentation manager, HTML editor, and email program.

The program also works as a macro tool, letting you create keyboard shortcuts. For example, typing a shortcut will automatically paste in whatever text you want, up to 20 pages. The program also gives you multiple clipboards, which can be big time-savers. If you don't need macros or multiple clipboards, a version of the app called As-U-Type Speller will do the spell checking for $20 less than the

full edition. Free trials of both versions are available for download.

Han-soft Internet Secure Tunneling 1.5

If you use an email client to send and receive messages using public wireless networks, it's vital to set up secure tunneling, otherwise your email password (and your mail) will be visible to anyone and everyone on that network. By setting up a secure tunnel, your email and, optionally, other data you send and receive, such as database connections, is encrypted.

Although creating a secure tunnel is essential, it isn't always easy. Internet Secure Tunneling makes the process significantly easier than doing it without the app. We said "easier," not "easy." Our main qualm with the program is with its sparse documentation. Still, spending a few minutes figuring out tunneling beats having strangers spy on your email.

NetStumbler.com NetStumbler 0.4.0

Traveling with a laptop often means searching for and connecting to public Wi-Fi networks that you aren't familiar with. NetStumbler helps discover wireless networks and determine their signal strength, channel, and speed. In addition, the program can detect unsecured wireless networks. When it finds a network—for instance, when you drive by a coffee shop with free Internet access—it beeps, so you can pull over and check your email. When you're at a conference center or hotel with multiple access points, the program will show them all, so you can use the one with the strongest connection at your location.

On the road NetStumbler has been known to be used by some for wardriving; combined with a GPS receiver, the software will log the names and locations of wireless networks. Back at home NetStumbler can help tune your own wireless network by finding areas with poor coverage and detecting nearby networks that may be interfering with yours.

PassMark Software BatteryMon 2.0

Is your laptop's battery working as well as it should or as well as it used to? Over time batteries can lose their ability to hold a charge. If you think your notebook's battery has lost its gusto, BatteryMon will tell you for sure. The program monitors the performance of a notebook's battery, graphing its charge level as you use the computer. It can send an email when the charge reaches a certain mark and stop the system from sleeping if you want the battery to run down completely.

BatteryMon will also tell you vital stats about your battery, including its chemistry, capacity, voltage, and temperature. These

PDA Must-Haves

You don't have to cart your laptop around everywhere; PDAs let you do more with less. Here are a few picks for essential PDA software.

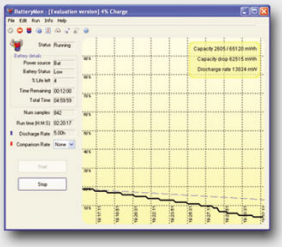
For Palm OS. Documents To Go Premium Edition 7 ($49; www.dataviz.com) lets you access a wide variety of documents on your Palm OS PDA. With it you can view and edit Word, Excel, and PowerPoint documents and have access to basic word processing features, including spell checking and word counts. You can also view images and some PDF files. When you're back at the PC, the app will automatically synchronize your files with those on the computer. The package also includes Bachmann Software's FilePoint Wireless Edition, which lets you wirelessly retrieve documents from a shared desktop or network folder.

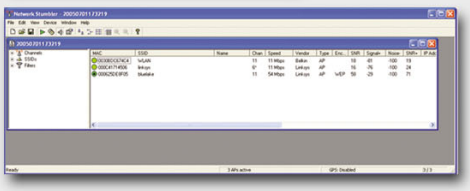
MMPlayer ($17.95; www.mmplayer.com) is an audio and video player for Palm handhelds that plays MP3, WAV, DivX, and other formats, so you can load your Palm up with tunes or even a full-length movie. The Web site includes instructions for encoding video to squeeze a movie onto a 128MB flash card.

For Pocket PC. If your Pocket PC's built-in Contacts, Calendar, and Tasks applications aren't as useful as they should be, check out PocketInformant 2005 2.1 ($29.95; www.pocketinformant.com). The program offers five customizable calendar views plus contacts, tasks, and notes. It also supports recurring tasks, lets you color-code events, and more.

Take your tunes on the road with PocketMusic (free; www.pocketmind.com), a freeware MP3 player. You can change the look of the program using Winamp skins. (There are about a billion to choose from.) The $19.95 Player Bundle adds the ability to play Ogg Vorbis, Audible, and streaming audio files. ▲

Internet Secure Tunneling 1.5
$15.99
Han-soft
www.han-soft.com





NetStumbler 0.4.0
Free
NetStumbler.com
www.netstumbler.com

BatteryMon 2.0
$24
PassMark Software
www.passmark.com

PopCap Games
Free to $20
PopCap Games
www.popcap.com

stats can be useful for verifying that a cheap aftermarket battery meets the specs the manufacturer promises.

PopCap Games

Your laptop can be a great source of entertainment on an airplane, in a hotel room, or wherever your travels take you. If you've drained every last morsel of enjoyment out of Solitaire and Minesweeper, head to PopCap Games for some fun, easy-to-learn games. If you're killing time somewhere with an Internet connection, you can play 24 free, Web-based games at the site. These include puzzle, card, arcade, and word games. Favorites include Bookworm, a Boggle-like word-find game; Bejeweled, a colorful tile-matching game; and the addicting Chuzzle.

For offline fun you can download deluxe versions of 20 games (primarily for Windows, Palm, and PocketPC, with some for Mac OS X). These apps are each $20 after a free trial. Most are feature-laden versions of the online games with extra levels and better graphics. No matter what type of game you like, you're sure to find something amusing, and it's better than staring at the arrival monitors at the airport (and certainly more fun than Solitaire).

Steganos Safe 8

If your notebook is stolen, insurance can reimburse you for the replacement cost of the hardware. (Safeware specializes in computer insurance and offers instant online quotes.) For most business users, however, the data on the laptop—spreadsheets, business contracts, and more—is more valuable than the hardware itself.

Steganos Safe can keep your private data out of strangers' hands. The program creates an encrypted virtual hard drive (up to 64GB using 256-bit AES), so your data is nothing but encrypted gibberish to anyone who doesn't know the password. When you provide the password, the data is decrypted and as accessible as regular files. If you'd don't want to have to remember another password, the program can unlock files when you insert a USB key or when your Bluetooth mobile phone is in proximity of the computer. (These are interesting ideas, but they mean your data is only as secure as your USB key or phone; we'll stick with a password.) The program also includes a secure file-wiping utility, so information you delete can't be recovered.

TGRMN Software ViceVersa Pro 1.3.1

Sometimes you work on a notebook; sometimes you work on a desktop PC. ViceVersa can synchronize the data between the two PCs to assure that the documents you take on the road are the latest and greatest versions. You can set the app to check for changed files on a schedule (once a day, for example) or continuously monitor files on both computers for changes.

The software doubles as a backup tool; it can copy your laptop's files to an external hard drive, removable media, or another PC on the network. ViceVersa can also retain several versions of each file, so you can revert to an old version if necessary. A Plus version is available for $30.

TopoGrafix ExpertGPS 1.3.7

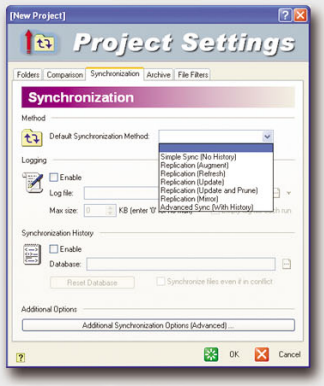
If you use a GPS receiver, chances are it quietly creates track logs as you travel about where you've been and how fast you were traveling. By itself that data isn't much fun, but combine it with ExpertGPS' mapping software, and you can do some cool stuff. ExpertGPS will overlay your tracks on top of aerial photos or topographic maps, which it downloads automatically. Feed it GPS track logs, and you can literally see where you've been. You can also take the laptop in the car for a real-time moving map.

ExpertGPS also lets you draw a planned route on a map to show you nearby features and lets you download those as waypoints to your GPS receiver. You can also scan your own maps and calibrate the software to work with them.

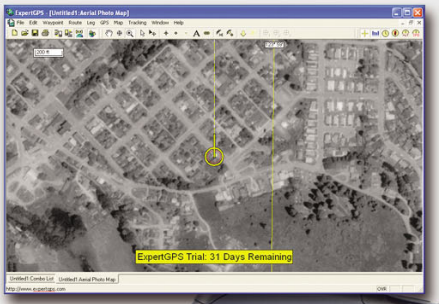
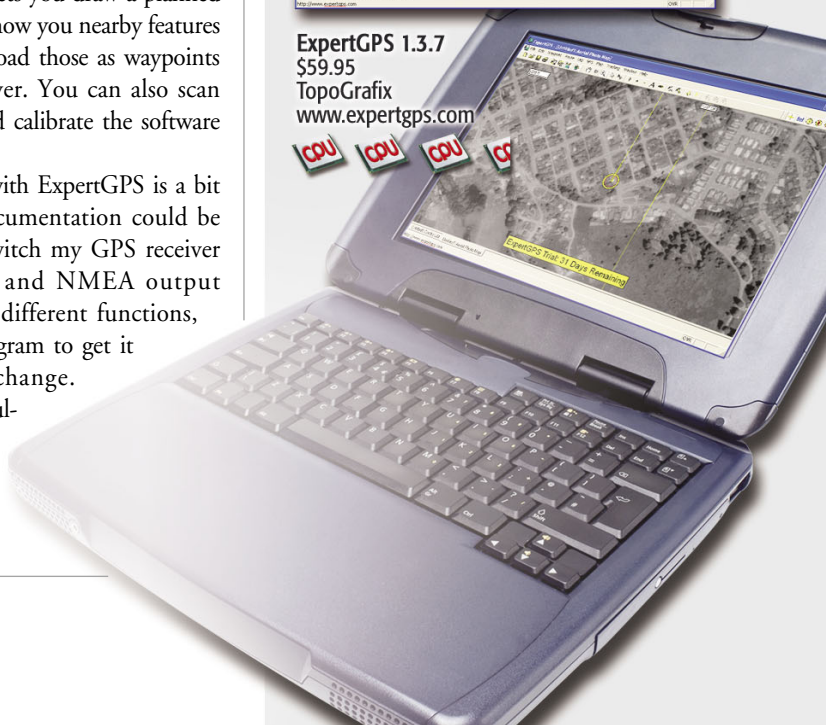
Getting started with ExpertGPS is a bit tricky, and the documentation could be clearer. I had to switch my GPS receiver between Garmin and NMEA output modes to perform different functions, plus restart the program to get it to recognize the change. Despite these difficulties ExpertGPS is a fun way to get more use from your GPS receiver. ▲

Steganos Safe 8
Setting up a secure drive
Specifying the password
Enter a new password for the secure drive.
New password:
New password (repeat):
Store password on mobile device (e.g. USB stick, PocketPC).
Password quality:
This password can probably be identified with special software.
< Back
Next >
Cancel

Safe 8
$35.95
Steganos
www.steganos.com



ViceVersa Pro 1.3.1
$59.95
TGRMN Software
www.tgrmn.com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